

Philadelphia, PA – Following a meeting with regional Veterans Administration (VA) leadership and a tour of the Philadelphia Veterans Community Living Center on Civic Center Boulevard on Saturday morning September 26, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) expressed his disappointment in the recently-made available document from 2008 that detailed abysmal conditions at that nursing home. However, he stated his confidence that the facility was undergoing an appropriate overhaul after the findings by the Wisconsin-based Long Term Care Institute that the center had “failed to provide a sanitary and safe environment for its residents.” The new leadership demonstrated a comprehensive approach to both dealing with the specific issues mentioned in the report and improving the overall living and working environment for the Veterans and staff.

“As we move forward, I expressed in today’s meeting my dismay that two inspections of the nursing home did not reveal the deplorable conditions, and just as importantly, that a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request was required to bring to light the Long Term Care report’s revelation of poor care,” said Congressman Sestak. “If there are other known instances of inadequate VA care, they should be disclosed immediately with confirmation of the appropriate corrective action taken. This is the correct approach to ensure public – particularly Veteran – confidence in the VA leadership’s efforts to improve accountability.

“I continue to advocate mandatory unannounced inspections of VA facilities at irregular intervals – with correct inspection metrics. Congressional oversight is required and we should make all inspection results available to the public online.”

The Congressman emphasized the need to continue to examine facilities nationally to determine whether any of the problems at the West Philadelphia center had occurred elsewhere. He took from today’s events a number of additional objectives to pursue in his upcoming meetings and correspondence with national VA leaders:

The VA must release any other inspection reports of this nature in its possession. The public should have had immediate access to all such reports – including the three done at the Community Living Center, so there could be a full accounting of any deficiencies in care. The VA protocol that prevented dissemination of the Long-Term Care Institute’s report until a FOIA request was filed by the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review must be repealed. In Pennsylvania, nursing homes are inspected annually by the Pennsylvania Department of Health, which requires that anyone can ask to see a copy of this report at any nursing home, and nursing homes must have notices posted to tell you where the survey results are kept. In fact, they are posted online. This kind of transparency -- which enables accountability and reform -- is the least we can do for America’s heroes.

If the VA is unable to provide this necessary reform at the administrative level, the Congressman plans to introduce legislation to mandate the release of these kinds of inspection reports.

An examination is needed to determine why the two initial reviews did not reveal the problems

documented in the Long Term Care report and whether appropriate criteria are consistently used in similar investigations at VA facilities.

More needs to be done to ensure that we have enough health care professions trained to deal with the special needs of the elderly, including at facilities like the Community Living Center. The Congressman has co-sponsored the Geriatrics Loan Forgiveness Act of 2009, which would increase the prominence of gerontologists in the National Health Services Corps program, and the Direct Support Professionals Fairness and Security Act of 2009, which would help retain direct support professionals – who are the backbone of long-term care – by providing additional federal funds to increase their salaries. The Congressman intends to continue efforts to have them included in the health care reform bill in Congress.

Most importantly, Congressman Sestak used the visit – attended by Philadelphia VA Medical Center Director Richard Citron and other senior officials at the Philadelphia VA – as an opportunity to broaden the scope of the discussion in the wake of this disturbing report. He stressed the determination with which he, his colleagues and the VA must work together to turn the page to a new era for the agency – one in which funds are sufficiently allocated to provide the benefits our Veterans have earned, and in which Congress and all VA officials maintain an unwavering focus on full accountability, transparency and oversight for how resources are implemented.

“As much as we would like to put this upsetting report behind us, we must remember that it is symbolic of the long-unacceptable lack of accountability for how we have treated our Veterans,” said Congressman Sestak, himself a 31-year Navy Veteran. “Now, in a time of economic turmoil, with two wars overseas, we have a duty, more than ever, to have a change from a checkered past that includes, as recently as 2003 and 2004, Congress underfunding the VA by \$2 billion.”

The Congressman further pointed out that this most recent revelation followed an investigation into carelessly administered radiation to cancer patients at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, and appalling reports that millions of dollars in improper bonuses were assigned to senior VA managers in 2007 and 2008, as hundreds of thousands of disability claims remained backlogged.

“I went to Congress in 2007 with a mission to repair a system that did not consistently compensate our Veterans as it should have and we have made progress. In the last two and a half years, we have approved: the largest increase in funding in VA history; legislation to re-enroll the hundreds of thousands of Veterans making as little as \$29,000 who were deemed ineligible for VA services by the Bush Administration as Congress stood by; and a new GI Bill that restores full, four-year college scholarships for those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Nonetheless, as we attempt to recover from past neglect of our Veterans and their families, we face daunting challenges that create an even greater sense of urgency for fully reforming the VA. Nearly 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans screen positive for PTSD or depression, more than one in eight soldiers in these conflicts take anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications or sleeping pills, and one in every four homeless is a Veteran. These circumstances exist as our World War Two Veterans are in their 80s and 90s, and our Korea and Vietnam Veterans reach

their 70s and 60s respectively. All the while, savings and earning have been compromised by the recession, and health care costs have skyrocketed, causing some companies to cancel benefits for retirees. More and more Veterans are turning to the VA.

“Our government as a whole should take note of the past systemic breakdowns in Veterans care and recognize how a lack of real accountability for everyone involved permitted these episodes to happen. The American people, and most of all the men and women who have worn the cloth of this nation, demand and deserve proper oversight and transparency from the VA and all who serve them. Without it, Americans will not regain their trust in government.

“Under the leadership of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, the VA can become a model for other institutions to follow and one of the premier health care systems in the nation. I look forward to continuing my close relationship with the Secretary, Richard Citron and Mike Moreland, as we take this opportunity to finally work toward a consistently efficient, effective and accountable system to care for our Veterans.”

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.